Hezbollah's Presence And Iran's Influence In Venezuela Coming Into Focus

By Penny L. Watson

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Admiral Craig S. Faller, Commander of U.S. Southern Command, testified before the Senate Armed Services Committee on February 7, 2019 that "Iran has deepened its anti-U.S. Spanish language media coverage and has **exported its state support for terrorism into our hemisphere**." This statement came on the heels of Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's statement on FOX the previous day. Pompeo stated, "**Hezbollah has active cells – the Iranians are impacting** the people of Venezuela and throughout South America."

There is very little public knowledge about the activities of the Iranian regime and Lebanese Hezbollah in Latin America. There are **only a handful of scholars** who have presented analysis of the activities of Iran and Hezbollah there. Until now there has been only a handful of public statements by U.S. government officials. It is safe to assume that U.S. intelligence and military officials have far more intelligence about such activities than what they have made public. It is also safe to assume that their knowledge constitutes only a portion of the total of the activities of the Iranian regime and Hezbollah.

The Islamic Republic has had close relations with Venezuela for some time now. Iran's close ties with the Nicolás Maduro regime and the previous president Hugo Chávez, have enabled Iran to extend its military and financial presence, primarily through its proxy Hezbollah.

These bonds strengthened starting 2005 between Ahmadinejad and Chávez. However, a strong Hezbollah support network has existed in Venezuela for a long time. Hezbollah has had cells in Venezuela since the 1990's according to a July 2003 report by Mark Steinitz, the then-director of the terrorism analysis office in the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research.

Margarita Island off the Caribbean coast of Venezuela serves as a hub for drug trafficking and Hezbollah as well as other Islamist extremists such as Hamas. Margarita Island **is being used by Iranian and Iranian-linked militants** as a base of operations. Steinitz further added that "attention has focused on the group's presence among Lebanese Shia in the 12,000-strong Arab community on Margarita Island." There are large Syrian and Lebanese diaspora communities in Venezuela which serve as valuable sources of revenue and offer support to Hezbollah and Iran. **Antonio Salas an author who infiltrated terrorist groups i**n Venezuela in 2010 revealed that there were **"as many as six terrorist training camps,** mostly run by Venezuelan military officers, spread around the capital city of Caracas and Margarita Island."

Venezuela is one of many Latin American countries in the Bolivarian Alliance for the

Peoples of Our America (ALBA). According to Joel Hirst, ALBA has solicited the aid of Iran and Hezbollah to train their military in asymmetric warfare. Venezuela became interested in asymmetric warfare in 2006 under Chávez. Terrorism is a part of asymmetric warfare, and Venezuela's participation "has allowed Hezbollah to plan, fundraise, train, coordinate and carry out operations, mostly fundraising and intelligence collection."

In 2015 General John F. Kelly, the then-Commander of the United States Southern Command, testified that the Iranian proxy terrorist group Hezbollah has long viewed Latin America as a venue by which they can attack Israeli or other Western targets. Kelly further stated that nations such as "Venezuela, Ecuador, and Bolivia restrict defense ties with the United States and have sought in some cases to eliminate the US military presence from their countries." This reduced U.S. presence in Venezuela provides an opportunity for Iran to utilize its proxy against the U.S. General James R. Clapper, the director of national intelligence, stated in 2013 that " Iran may be more willing to seize opportunities to attack in the United States in response to perceived offenses against the regime." Iran's strategic position in Venezuela, and its freedom of action there, can help to facilitate such an attack." Iran having established strong ties in Venezuela, has been able "to establish a military industrial footprint" in the form of military-to-military agreements between Iran and Venezuela.

According to Martin Rodil, an expert in Latin American politics, Venezuela agreed to provide Iran with "intelligence infrastructure such as arms, identification documents, bank accounts, and pipelines for moving operatives and equipment between Iran and Latin America." Coviassa (the state airline in Venezuela) and Iran Air (the state airline in Iran) were used to transport military technology and personnel from Iran to Venezuela. Conviassa personnel claimed that radioactive materials and missile system components were on these flights. This operation continued from 2007 to 2011; these flights and their passengers were never inspected. Ordinary citizens were unable to obtain a seat on these flights; instead, these seats were reserved for "Iranian agents, including Hezbollah, the IRGC, and other intelligence personnel."

According to Admiral Kurt W. Tidd, the then-Commander of the United States Southern Command, who testified before Congress in February 2018, "Lebanese Hezbollah maintains an established logistical, facilitating, and operational presence in this region that can be quickly leveraged with no warning." He further stated that "Venezuela has long provided a permissive environment for narco-terrorist groups and Lebanese Hezbollah supporters, and is a transit country for the smuggling of illicit drugs and Special Interest Aliens (SIAs)." Special Interest Aliens are foreign nationals from a country with potential or known terrorist links.

Matthew Levitt, the director of The Washington Institute's Jeanette and Eli Reinhard Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence, wrote that in 2011 a prominent member of Chávez's government was accused by the media of issuing passports to members of Hezbollah and Hamas. U.S. officials have stated that Venezuelan officials have issued fake cedulas (Venezuelan version of a social security card) to people from Middle Eastern countries who would not have qualified for these documents. These documents make it possible for them to then get a Venezuelan passport and consequently a U.S. visa. These documents have made it possible for members of Hezbollah to join and form

cells within the U.S. as was done with the Charlotte, North Carolina Hezbollah cell.

As I have argued elsewhere, the fundamentalist regime ruling in Iran considers the United States as the main obstacle for the achievement of its grand strategy of exporting its revolution to the Middle East. In order to counter American superiority in conventional warfare the fundamentalist regime has been developing a number of unconventional tactics. For example, the regime has repeatedly threatened to block the Strait of Hormuz if there were serious conflict with the U.S. Latin America is the soft underbelly of the U.S. whereby Iran and its proxy Hezbollah may wage terrorist activities against American targets in Latin America as well as on American soil.

Hezbollah has been a growing threat for the U.S. through Venezuela. For many years such threats have been swept under the carpet. It appears that the Trump administration is pursuing a more determined policy toward Iran. During Obama's presidency Iran's and Hezbollah's activities in Latin America were not being mentioned much by officials, because of interest in securing and maintaining the Iran nuclear deal. American officials are finally acknowledging a threat that the Obama administration previously preferred to ignore. It appears that the Trump administration's maximum pressure policy toward Iran includes countering Iran's nefarious activities in Venezuela.

SEE ALSO:
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